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# The hardening face of Islam in South Asia. Why it matters to the UK

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*The recent spate of terrorist attacks across Europe have fed into existing debates about Islamic extremism. **Abdullah Yusuf** and **Oliver Goff** examine some of the shifting dynamics in Islam and consider how they might impact the UK.*

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Douglas Murray's new book 'The Strange Death of Europe' sounds the death-knell of a civilisation. Besieged by incompatible cultures and ideologies, the continent is said to be facing an irreparable dilution of its once proud identity. This sentiment exists well beyond the pages of right-wing political literature. The popularity of far-right political parties in recent years, as shown by the gains made by Le Front National in France, along with Geert Wilder's [Partij Voor de Vrijheid](#) (PVV) party in the Netherlands, points to a growing suspicion of multiculturalism amongst many Europeans. A number of high-profile terrorist attacks in recent years has, rightly or wrongly, catapulted Islam to the forefront of political debate on the continent.

Any serious political discussion on Islam must appreciate that the religion itself is not monolithic. Islam and its teachings have been subjected to a myriad of interpretations and practices since its birth over 1400 years ago. These diverse expressions of Islam have translated into a multiplicity of cultures and ideologies within the Muslim world. The two largest Muslim communities in the UK are known as the Deobandi and the Barelvi, with the groups combined controlling 68 of mosques in the country. Despite their considerable influence on the UK's Muslim communities, there is a surprising lack of knowledge about these groups. With multiculturalism under ever increasing scrutiny, the need exists to familiarise ourselves with these groups, examine their history and the attitudes they hold, whilst also considering the likely trajectory of their ideologies, both at home and abroad.

## UNITED BY GOD, SEPARATED BY HISTORY

The early history of Islam begins in the 7th century AD in modern day Saudi Arabia. However, it would be over a 1000 years before the birth of the Deobandi movement, which now controls almost 800 mosques in the UK. The movement itself is named after the place of its origin, Deoband, an Indian city 100 miles north of New Delhi. The sect began as a reaction to British colonialism in South Asia when a group of scholars identified this Western encroachment upon the region as a corrupting agent against the purity of Islam. This group of Indo-Muslim scholars created the now famous Darul Uloom Deoband in 1866 (Darul Uloom – translating to 'house of knowledge'). This religious seminary was to become a focal point of anti-imperialist thought and of an increasingly conservative strand of Islam on the Indian subcontinent.

As time passed, the Darul Uloom Deoband cemented itself as one of the leading Islamic centres of teaching and research, spreading further into South Asia. During the Indian independence campaign, the Deobandis adopted a strategy of joint nationalism with Hindus in an effort to repel colonial forces from the country. In 1919, a large group of Deobandi scholars formed the political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind and opposed the Pakistan Movement which sought to create a separate Muslim homeland in South Asia.

In contrast, the Ahle Sunnat wal Jama'at, commonly referred to as the Bareilvi, were born in the modest town of Bareilly, 184 miles south of Deoband. The group's founder, Imam Ahmed Raza Khan, identified an intellectual and moral decline within the Islamic communities of India. The movement was also an attempt to support Sufism, known also as 'mystical Islam', which was beginning to lose ever more ground to the more conservative Deobandi movement. Created in 1904, during India's quest for independence the Bareilvi strongly supported the Pakistan Movement. In 1948, following the partition of India, the Bareilvi created an association called the Jamiyyat-u Ulam-i Pakistan to represent the interests of the group in their new state. Despite the proximity of these groups and their shared Indo-Muslim heritage, there has been no thawing in relations of late, with co-operation between these two Islamic powerhouses seeming altogether unlikely.

## **OLD RIVALS, NEW WORLD**

Today there are approximately 600 million Muslims in South Asia, accounting for over 30 percent of the region's population. It is the largest regional population of Muslims in the world. Nowhere is the cultural and political significance of Islam in South Asia more apparent than in Pakistan, the first state to have been created in the name of Islam. Recent decades have witnessed violent struggles between Muslim groups as they seek to assert their control over mosques and the related financial resources.

This theological quarrel has also manifested itself in the form of madrassas (Islamic schools), with each group, particularly the Deobandi, utilising these institutions to spread their ideology and gain the trust of local communities. An underfunded schooling system has allowed the Deobandi to entice new followers due to their ever growing number of madrassas in South Asia. In Pakistan, the number of these institutions has risen from 244 in 1956 to about 24,000 in 2015, the vast majority of them being Deobandi.

The spread of the Deobandi within South Asia has not been welcomed by all, with many groups, including the Bareilvi, who cite increasing violence and a worrying militarisation of the Deobandi ideology. This claim is made more credible when considering some of the groups that have arisen from the Deobandi ideology. Amongst its most notorious ideological adherents is the Taliban, the fundamentalist Sunni political movement currently waging an insurgency in Afghanistan. Many of the Taliban's leaders attended Deobandi madrassas in north-eastern Pakistan, with Deobandi fundamentalism shaping much of the group's ultra-conservative attitudes towards issues such as [womens' rights](#). The Deobandi have not aided their ailing international reputation by the pronouncement of a number of fatwas (religious rulings) issued by the Darul Uloom Deoband. One such ruling declared that women cannot work for wages, based on the belief that men and women should not be in close proximity of each other in a working environment, as dictated by Sharia (Islamic) law.

Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan have been described by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, former Indian Prime-minister and a leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party, as '[factories of](#)

[terror](#)’, following a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament which almost took the two countries to war in 2001. Due to increasing pressure on them in the Indian subcontinent, the Deobandi were forced to issue a blanket condemnation of terrorism in the name of Islam. The ‘confrontational’ nature of Deobandi thought within South Asia has done little to calm relations with groups that diverge from their own strict Sunni-fundamentalist ideology. The Barelvi, along with other minority Islamic sects in the region, have sought to expose the Deobandi as dangerous and intolerant, even branding the Deobandis as ‘Wahabis’. This is a serious accusation worth further examination.

## **DEOBANDIS AND WAHABIS: A DANGEROUS PARTNERSHIP?**

Wahhabism is a virulent, ultra conservative sect of Islam with its origins in the birthplace of Islam itself – Saudi Arabia. It predates the Deobandi sect by roughly 130 years, and has been described by the European Parliament in Strasbourg as the main source of global terrorism. The movement forms the foundation of Saudi politics and culture, where [womens’ rights are severely curtailed](#) and there are regular public beheadings for offences such as [witchcraft and sorcery](#). Wahhabism also discriminates against other Muslims such as the Shia who are deemed ‘heretics’. Saudi Arabia has utilised vast amounts of petrodollars [to export their ideology throughout the world](#), with the Deobandi sect receiving considerable support from its Arab ally.

The Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 triggered a mutually beneficial alignment of motivations between both sides – the Saudis bankrolled a staggering expansion of Deobandi mosques and madrassas in Pakistan in order to train fighters to combat the invading, godless Soviets. The support afforded by the Saudis also ensured that many who seemed condemned to a life of illiteracy and poverty were given an education, further bonding the rank and file of young Pakistani Muslims to the regressive Wahhabi ideology.

US government and non-governmental sources obtained by Wikileaks claimed that financial support estimated at nearly \$100 million annually was making its way to the Deobandi. This ranged from direct support from the Saudi government, to surreptitious aid provided by ‘missionary’ and ‘charitable’ organisations which carried the blessing of the Saudi government. In April 2017, a deal was finalised that approved [the construction of 560 mosques in Bangladesh](#). The project has been fully funded by the Saudi government to the tune of over a billion dollars. The irresistible lure of Saudi petrodollars is changing the very face of Islam on the Indian subcontinent. Wahhabism is understandably, if only partly, credited with precipitating the emergence of Sunni-fundamentalism as the dominant Islamic force in the region.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UK**

With the Deobandi controlling 45 percent of British mosques, it cannot be disputed that the group influences the lives of many British Muslims. As the phenomenon of Sunni-fundamentalist thought remains strong in South Asia, similar problems have been identified in the UK, with the Deobandi community and their leaders coming under increasing criticism. An undercover investigation by *The Times* found that numerous respected Deobandi preachers had given talks and sermons at Britain’s most influential Deobandi seminary near Bury, Greater Manchester. [These events](#) were described as thoroughly anti-western in sentiment. One such sermon made by a graduate of the seminary described music as the way in which Jews spread “the Satanic web” to corrupt young Muslims.

[A leaked government report](#) found that Deobandi chaplains were routinely spreading malicious material in prisons, encouraging the murder of apostates, endorsing homophobic views, and even describing Jewish, Christian, and other non-Muslim women as “repulsive”. Seventeen of Britain’s 26 Islamic seminaries are also run by Deobandis, producing 80 percent of clerics trained here. It is not suggested that all British Muslims who worship at Deobandi mosques subscribe to the fundamentalist sentiments expressed within some corners of the community. That being said, the future of Islam in the UK, as in South Asia, appears to be moving towards a more conservative and insular interpretation of the religion.

The worrying convergence of Deobandi and Wahhabi ideology is a challenge. The ever-hardening face of Islam in South Asia provides a warning of what happens when Sunni-fundamentalism is allowed to spread unabated. The potential implications for the UK remain murky and attitudes that debase the basic principles of our society, such as tolerance and unity, must be questioned – however uncomfortable that might be. These dialogues must be approached honestly and great care must be taken prevent them being perceived as being accusatory in nature. The ever-increasing polarisation of attitudes towards multiculturalism must be met with open debate and conversation.

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Feature image: The aftermath of a terrorist attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, September 2008. Image: [Wikimedia Commons](#): [CC BY 2.0]